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BENEDICT XV AND THE HISTORICAL BASIS FOR THOMISTIC STUDY ¹

The present Holy Father, Benedict XV, has shown on more than one occasion his sterling leadership in the most important matters of the Church discipline. In everything that makes for the efficiency of the Church and its recognition as a vital force in society he has been most assiduous. Especially has he been anxious that the Catholic clergy should stand on the firing line of modern problems and demonstrate to the world their ability to meet the questions of the day and solve for society the questions of human happiness. For this reason this worthy successor of St. Peter has been zealous for the education of the clergy, so that in meeting the issues of the day and in refuting false philosophy he might have that assuring help of a thoroughly trained clergy and a properly equipped laity. In the educational program of Benedict the Fifteenth the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas has a most important place. The philosophy and theology of this hallowed intellectual giant of the 13th century are the foundation stones in the great clerically intellectual edifice that the Pontiff wishes to build. In the general legislation of the universal Church, in the decrees of the Congregation of Studies, and in the many encouraging private letters he has written, Benedict the Fifteenth has shown that the principles of the Angelic Doctor are the reliance on which he places his hope for the intellectual renovation of modern thinking. His commands and his advice on this most serious question have been taken with reverent obedience, and the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas have been called once again to the attention of the thinking world, both Catholic and unbelieving. The far-reaching results of this sanction placed on the study of the Angelic Doctor is not without its importance in the field of history and it is in this connection that the legislation of the Holy Father is considered in this paper.

The historical basis for the study of St. Thomas, which has

¹ Paper read at the first annual meeting of the American Catholic Historical Association.

been enjoined by Benedict the Fifteenth, may be understood in two ways. This command may be viewed in the light of the pronouncements made by other Popes and Councils of the Church in favor of the Angelic Doctor, and it may be considered in relation to the historical problems and situations that the study of St. Thomas entails. In either case it will be seen that the study of the *Summa Theologica*, or of the principles of Catholic theology and philosophy in the other works of St. Thomas involves historical ramifications that are consoling to those who would have the study of Catholic history increased.

An isolated consideration of the unstinted praise given to the Angel of the Schools and his works by Benedict the Fifteenth might lead one to think that this conduct was rather unusual. But to those who are in touch with the historical phases of the Thomistic revival, and who realize the force of the recommendations and commands formerly made, the enshrining of Thomistic principles and the sanctioning of Thomistic study by Benedict XV are not unprecedented. In fact the use of the principles, method, and doctrine of St. Thomas, as urged by the Pope in the Code, is but the climax of his own personal interest in this subject and the culmination of the great Thomistic movement begun by the great Leo XIII, and intensively carried on by the saintly Pius X. The encyclical, "Aeterni Patris" of the former, and the letter "Angelici Doctoris" of the latter, centered the attention of the philosophical and theological world on the monumental work of the Angelic Doctor, and paved the way for the stringent legislation of the present Holy Father. These three Popes have blazed a trail that has led to a steadily increasing appreciation of the value of the organization which St. Thomas gave to Catholic Theology nearly seven hundred years ago. They have been the means of inducing thinking men to study the sound philosophy which St. Thomas brought to the defence and explanation of revealed truth. But even these outstanding leaders of Christ's Church were not the pioneers in bringing before the world the value of the teachings of St. Thomas in the solution of the problems that mean intellectual, social, economic and religious happiness to mankind. Their predecessors in the chair of St. Peter for the last six and a half cen-

turies have manifested on many occasions a zeal for the extension of Thomistic study.

From the time that St. Thomas began to win recognition among the scholars of his own time for his tremendous service in the defence of Catholic teaching there have been about eighty Popes directing the destinies of the Church. Some of them occupied the Holy See for comparatively short periods, but it is exceptional to find any of those whose influence was ever felt, neglecting to recommend, either directly or indirectly, the study of the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. In fact, in this long procession of the vicars of Christ, there were only eight who did not add their voices in one way or another to the hymn of praise and recognition of the work of the Angelic Doctor. It must be kept in mind that, almost from the death of St. Thomas in 1274, the study of his teachings became the basis of the Dominicans' traditional process of learning, and that many of the encomiums passed by the Popes on the spirit and results of Dominican intellectual activity redound to the praise of the theological and philosophical system which St. Thomas organized and bequeathed to the Order of Preachers. But Papal sanction of the teachings of the Angel of the Schools went in most cases to greater and more defined heights.

These Papal expressions of approval range from simple recommendations to positive commands, that the principles and works of St. Thomas be made the bulwark of the teaching imparted to the future priests of the Church. This support of Thomistic teaching manifested by the highest authority of the Church for almost seven hundred years, this singling out of a general system of theology organized by one man rather than the selection of one special treatise that he wrote; especially the heroic self-sacrificing efforts of many of the Popes to establish and encourage Thomistic institutions of learning wherein their exhortations find concrete realization,—all these historical facts show that Benedict XV has followed the spirit of the Holy See in imitating his predecessors by insisting on loyalty to the principles, the method, and the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas.

This historical devotion of the Holy See to the teachings of St. Thomas is also reflected in the eight general councils of the Church that have been convoked since the time of the death of

St. Thomas. In each of these councils the influence of the Angelic Doctor has been felt, Thomistic theologians forming an important part of the discussions, Thomistic principles serving as the weapons of defence against the attacks of those unsympathetic, Thomistic terminology expressing the sentiments of the authorities of the Church in the decrees of the councils; and the very works of the Angelic Doctor serving, with the Bible, as the last source of enlightenment in the profound discussions of the day.

The importance attached to the study of St. Thomas by the Popes and the councils of the Church was not without its reaction from without the fold. The reliance placed by the teaching power of the Church in Thomistic teaching stimulated the translation of many of the works of St. Thomas into Greek, and of some into Hebrew, and drew many a word of praise from unbelievers who admired the overwhelming force of his logic, and the sublime extent of his organization.

The activity, therefore, of Benedict XV for the revival of a true and untainted Thomistic spirit is not so strange to the student of history as it may seem to others. There is an historical basis for the unqualified support which the present Holy Father has given to the movement. History reënforces his Thomistic propaganda, and in seeking the reasons for it we open up an absorbing feature of the life of the Church that is certain to stimulate the wider study of Catholic history.

The study of St. Thomas as advocated by our present Holy Father is sure to make for a deeper study of history in another way. I speak of the knowledge of historical situations presupposed in one who would hope to meet thoroughly and sympathetically the admonition of the Pope. The understanding and interpretation of a contemporary writer demands little if any historical investigation. But to throw oneself into the spirit of the writings of a genius who organized Catholic thought almost seven centuries ago necessitates some understanding of the conditions of his time. To know the formative influences that worked to produce so outstanding a character as that of St. Thomas means that the student must explore a trail of intellectual and spiritual monuments that leads back to the earliest days of the Church. To understand the reason for the method

that St. Thomas adopted forces the thorough investigator into the philosophical history of the past. To account for the extent of Thomistic literature awakens in the minds of many who had never thought of it before an historical curiosity about the religious, intellectual, sociological, political and economic situations of the wonderful and often baffling thirteenth century. It is through these direct and indirect contacts of the Angel of the Schools and through the study of them which cultured scholarship demands, that the science of history will profit from the Thomistic zeal of Benedict. Take for example some of these interesting problems which, though historical, must be familiar to the student who would have a sympathetic grasp on the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas. They are problems into which this busy traveler was constantly thrown and for which he was asked solutions. The student in Thomistic literature must have some understanding of these historical situations to thoroughly understand the wonderfully well organized solutions.

The intellectual contacts of St. Thomas were those influences that helped directly and indirectly to form the mental equipment that St. Thomas carried into his work. The historical student in searching for these will be brought into close touch with the intellectual giants of the thirteenth century—men like Albert the Great, Vincent of Beauvais, Peter Tarantasia, Alexander of Hales, and many others like Lombard and Abelard of an earlier date whose thinking and writing influenced his great work. He will also gain some insight into the university life of the thirteenth century, its development, its advantages and perils. He must necessarily be forced further back into history through the golden chain of the Fathers, each of whom stands as a record of the prevailing Catholic thought of his time. In tracing the sources of Thomistic philosophy and in analyzing the forces that united for its organization, the historical student will be carried along the Aristotelian trail that wandered through Spain, Arabia, Syria, and Greece, along which he will meet Greek and Saracen, Jew and Christian. Each of these carries historical contributions to the work of St. Thomas, either to be accepted or rejected according to the service they could or could not perform for the philosophizing of Christian revelation.

The economic environment in which St. Thomas lived must

also be known to the student of his writings if the principles enunciated by the Angelical are to be correctly interpreted for the needs of the present day. In this field the student must have recourse to the history of the middle ages to understand the means of production and distribution in the thirteenth century. He must give thought and study to the historical problems of the guilds in order to understand for present day needs the principles that St. Thomas formulated in this regard. The commerce, agriculture, and fishing of the time will also present themselves for investigation. The means of exchange, the coinage and the exchange of money and many allied economic topics must be explained by historians of thirteenth century life for the thorough Thomistic student of today.

The political contacts of St. Thomas undoubtedly explain the reasons for and the methods of many of his writings. St. Thomas was constantly traveling at the command of his religious superiors, and in answer to the requests of the Holy See. He was a close personal friend of King Louis IX and was in constant touch with many of the rulers of his age. As adviser to them he became associated with the great political movements of the thirteenth century, and, to understand many of his treatises, it is necessary for the student to call history to his aid. Thus the whole system of feudalism and its concurrent difficulties must be opened to the Thomistic sympathizer. The achievements and failures of the Crusades, with all their wealth of historical sidelights, must be also called from the historical records of the past. The constant bickerings between feudalistic lords, the jealous strife between nations, the diplomatic negotiations between the Papacy and the nations of the thirteenth century—all of these the historian can unfold for the better understanding of many of the principles on which St. Thomas persistently insists.

The field of religion in the thirteenth century must also be turned up by the historian so that the Thomistic scholar may be able to appreciate the practical reasons for many of the writings of the Angel of the Schools, and to interpret and apply them accordingly. He must have before him a history of the heresies of the time, he must be acquainted with the extensive missionary work carried on by the Church through the religious orders among the heathens, and he ought to have some knowledge of

the tremendous religious problems aroused by the Turks, the Greeks and the Jews. St. Thomas has been studied without all of these historical helps, but perhaps that is the reason why St. Thomas has been so often misunderstood. Perhaps that is the reason why some see so little in the writings of the Angelic Doctor, and why others expect to find too much.

In the sphere of sociology and social service the historian can also be of great service to the earnest philosopher and theologian who desires to see the command of Benedict realized as soon as possible. The social life of the thirteenth century certainly had its influence on the writings of a genius who wrote for practical purposes, and who despised the multiplication of useless questions. The sociological trend of present day scholarship makes the sympathetic understanding of St. Thomas' teachings in this matter especially desirable. And such an appreciation is impossible without some knowledge of the social conditions of his time. History must be called into service to give the philosopher and theologian some idea of the poverty and relief, disease and social service, slavery and the redemption of captives, travel and hospitality, beggary and almsgiving, brigandage, tournaments, superstition, magic and witchcraft of the thirteenth century. Historical research under the present discipline of Benedict becomes united with the study of St. Thomas, and the dead pages of the Angel of the Schools take on a new life when the absorbing social environment of the thirteenth century is thoroughly understood and appreciated.

This analysis represents, merely in a suggestive way, the historical basis of the legislation and encouragement of the present Holy Father in favor of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Much of the historical investigation postulated in this analysis has already been done, and on this the Thomistic student gratefully depends. Much remains to be done, and the historical literature of thirteenth century life is sure to be enriched by a wider and more comprehensive study of the Angelic Doctor.

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